

Superfoods to the Rescue

By: *Reader's Digest*

Luscious strawberries dipped in rich, dark chocolate. Grilled salmon. Mashed sweet potatoes dusted with cinnamon. Spinach salad tossed with cranberries and walnuts. More Healthy Living Recipes

A gourmet's delight? Definitely. A huge dose of heart health--from good fats and fiber to powerful antioxidants and essential vitamins and minerals? Without a doubt.

Superfoods such as the five described below work better than supplements to slash your risk of heart disease. Not only do they entertain your taste buds like a four-star chef, they also battle all six deadly heart attackers at the same time. Specifically, these amazing foods can:

- Reduce your risk of artery-clogging atherosclerosis
- Whittle away at cholesterol
- Lower your blood pressure
- Cool inflammation
- Neutralize damaging free radicals
- Reduce your chances of developing metabolic syndrome by keeping blood sugar lower and steadier
- When eaten in healthy portions, help you lose weight

You don't have to go to the health food store to find them; just wheel your cart through the supermarket. (*Hint:* Most are in the perimeter aisles, including the produce, meat, and dairy departments.) More good news: We've pulled together the quickest, tastiest ways to cook and serve these healing foods, from tried-and-true favorites to fresh, new ideas. Healthy eating doesn't have to take extra time out of your busy day--reaching for an ounce of dark chocolate or a fistful of walnuts is as quick as grabbing a bag of chips. And the taste? Out of this world.

1. Almonds

Super nutrients. Monounsaturated fat, magnesium, calcium, potassium, fiber.

Serving size: 1 ounce (about 24 almonds); 160 calories.

Benefits. A single serving of these crunchy, protein-packed nuggets provides a whopping 9 grams of monounsaturated fat to help slash LDLs ("bad" cholesterol) and boost HDLs ("good" cholesterol). Simply choosing almonds instead of a doughnut, chips, or pretzels for two snacks a day could cut LDLs nearly by 10 percent. Almonds also pack 6 percent of your daily calcium quota and 20 percent of the magnesium you need--two minerals proven to help lower blood pressure. Bonus: You get 35 percent of the Daily Value (DV) for vitamin E, an artery-protecting antioxidant, as well as 3 grams of fiber. Just be sure to stop with one handful at snack time--advice that holds true for all nuts because they're calorie-dense.

Good ideas:

One serving of almonds fits neatly into an empty Altoids mints tin. Fill the tin each morning and slip it into your purse or briefcase.

- Toss some almonds into salads, stir-fries, fruit salad, or hot or cold cereal.
- Keep slivered and sliced almonds on hand (store them in the freezer for freshness) to add to vegetable dishes, muffins, and cookies.

2. Apples

Super nutrients. Antioxidants, fiber.

Serving size: 1 medium; 80 calories.

Benefits. Red Delicious, Granny Smith, and Gala apples earned spots on the USDA's top-20 list of antioxidant-rich foods thanks to hefty quantities of the flavonoid quercetin (flavonoids are natural

chemicals in plants that, when in your bloodstream, remove free radical molecules, fight inflammation, and impede cancer). Bonus: Apples are a rich source of pectin, a soluble fiber. In a recent study at the University of California, Davis, people who ate two apples a day had fewer oxidized, artery-attacking LDLs than non-apple eaters.

Good ideas:

Chop an apple and add to hot cereal.

- For a portable snack, cut up an apple and place the slices in a zipper-lock plastic bag with 2 teaspoons of cinnamon. Carry it with you in an insulated lunch bag (with a freezer pack) to eat at lunch or as a snack. It tastes like apple pie, without the crust or the sugar.
- For a quick baked apple, core an apple, pack the center with raisins and walnuts, and dust with cinnamon. Place it in a bowl with 1/4 cup of orange juice, apple juice, or water and microwave on high for 5 minutes, or until done.

3. Carrots

Super nutrients. One of nature's top sources of beta-carotene, an artery-protecting antioxidant.

Serving size: 1 medium; 32 calories.

Benefits. Carrots are color therapy for your cardiovascular system. These veggies' brilliant orange hue is a sign of super-high levels of beta-carotene, an antioxidant that guards against artery-clogging oxidized LDL cholesterol. Only foods like carrots offer this protection--recent studies suggest that antioxidant pills don't help your heart. Cooked carrots have twice the antioxidant power of raw carrots because heat breaks down tough cell walls so that your body can use what's inside. Carrots also provide blood pressure-lowering potassium and magnesium, plus the homocysteine-lowering combination of folate; vitamin B6; and the antioxidants alpha-carotene, lutein, and zeaxanthin.

Good ideas:

Set out a bowl of baby carrots when you're cooking as a healthy snack that won't fill you up with unwanted calories or wreck your appetite.

- Buy sliced and shredded carrots in the produce department; add them to soups, salads, and casseroles.
- Instead of chips, serve presliced carrots with dip.
- Add finely grated carrots to muffins, tuna or salmon salad, and casseroles.
- Microwave baby carrots and stir in a dollop of honey for a sweet side dish.
- Roast carrots in the oven with olive oil.

4. Milk

Super nutrients. Great source of blood pressure-lowering calcium, magnesium, and potassium.

Serving size: 8 ounces 1% milk;110 calories.

Benefits. Your heart--and your waistline--love it when you have a milk mustache. (So, of course, do your bones!) A growing stack of research proves that calcium and other minerals in milk help lower blood pressure by keeping arteries flexible and helping your kidneys flush pressure-boosting sodium out of your body. A glass of cold moo juice at lunch or a generous splash on your morning cereal could cut your risk of insulin resistance--a potent heart disease risk factor--by 71 percent and help you lose weight. How? Mayo Clinic researchers suspect that calcium "down-regulates" fat absorption by fat cells and "up-regulates" fat burning.

Good ideas:

A favorite cocoa recipe: Mix 1 cup of fat-free or low-fat milk, two packets of sugar substitute, and cocoa in a small saucepan or microwaveable cup and heat for about 1 minute.

- Cook hot cereal and low-sodium instant or canned soups with milk instead of water.

- Make milk your drive-through thirst quencher. Most fast-food restaurants offer the low-fat variety in cartons or single-serve bottles.
- Order a latte with fat-free milk instead of black or with cream at your favorite coffee shop.
- Make sugar-free instant pudding with low-fat or fat-free milk and serve it with berries.
- Use fat-free evaporated milk in place of regular milk in baked goods, soups, and sauces. A cup contains 742 milligrams of calcium--more than double the amount in low-fat milk.
- Whip partially frozen fat-free evaporated milk for a high-calcium dessert topping that has one-tenth the calories of regular whipped cream.
- Puree fat-free or low-fat cottage cheese and fat-free evaporated milk with some lemon juice and rosemary for a light pasta sauce.

5. Kidney Beans

Super nutrients. Soluble fiber, folate, potassium, magnesium.

Serving size: 1/2 cup; 112 calories.

Benefits. Eating beans four times a week--in baked beans, bean dip, chili, or a salad sprinkled with chickpeas or black beans--could cut your risk of coronary heart disease by 20 to 30 percent. Make some of them kidney beans; they're rich in LDL-lowering soluble fiber (2 grams in a 1/2-cup serving) and homocysteine-controlling folate, as well as blood pressure-easing potassium and magnesium.

Bonus: Thanks to healthy doses of fiber and protein, beans give you steady energy, not a sudden rise (and fall) of blood sugar that ups your risk of metabolic syndrome and weight gain.

Good ideas:

Rinse canned kidney beans before using to remove sodium. Toss them into chili, casseroles, and soups.

- For a quick tamale pie, serve warm kidney beans over a piece of cornbread and top with grated cheese.
- Make a better three-bean salad: Combine kidney, black, and white beans, then mix in chopped tomatoes and scallions. Dress with olive oil, lemon juice, and black pepper.
- In a food processor or blender, combine cooked kidney beans with garlic, cumin, and chili peppers for a delicious spread that can be used as a dip for crudités or a sandwich filling.

From Reader's Digest *30 Minutes a Day to a Healthy Heart*.